

[ **HARDCOVER:** US ]

# Two future beats in search of their voices

BY **MICHIKO KAKUTANI**  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The best thing about this collaboration between Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs is its gruesomely comic title: *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*, a phrase the two writers said they once heard on a radio broadcast about a circus fire.

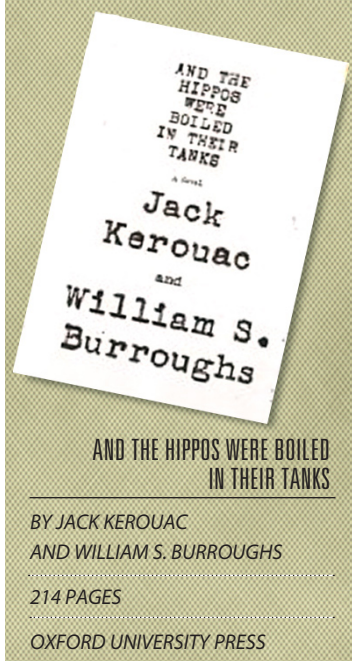
The novel itself, a sort of murder mystery written in 1945 when the authors were unpublished and unknown, is a flimsy piece of work — repetitious, flat-footed and devoid of any of the distinctive gifts each writer would go on to develop on his own.

The two authors take turns telling their story in alternating chapters. Kerouac, writing in the persona of Mike Ryko, tends to sound like ersatz Henry Miller without the sex or fake Hemingway without a war ("There was a long orange slant in the street and Central Park was all fragrant and cool and green-dark"); his chapters possess none of the electric spontaneity of *On the Road*, none of the stream-of-consciousness immediacy of his later work.

Burroughs, writing as Will Dennison, serves up passages that feel more like imitation Cain or Spillane: semi-hardboiled prose with flashes of Burroughs' famous nihilism but none of the experimental discontinuities and jump-cuts of *Naked Lunch*. In fact, both writers lean toward a plodding, highly linear, blow-by-blow style here that reads like elaborate stage directions: they describe every tiny little thing their characters do, from pouring a drink to walking out of a room to climbing some stairs, from ordering eggs in a restaurant to sending them back for being underdone to eating the new ones delivered by the waitress.

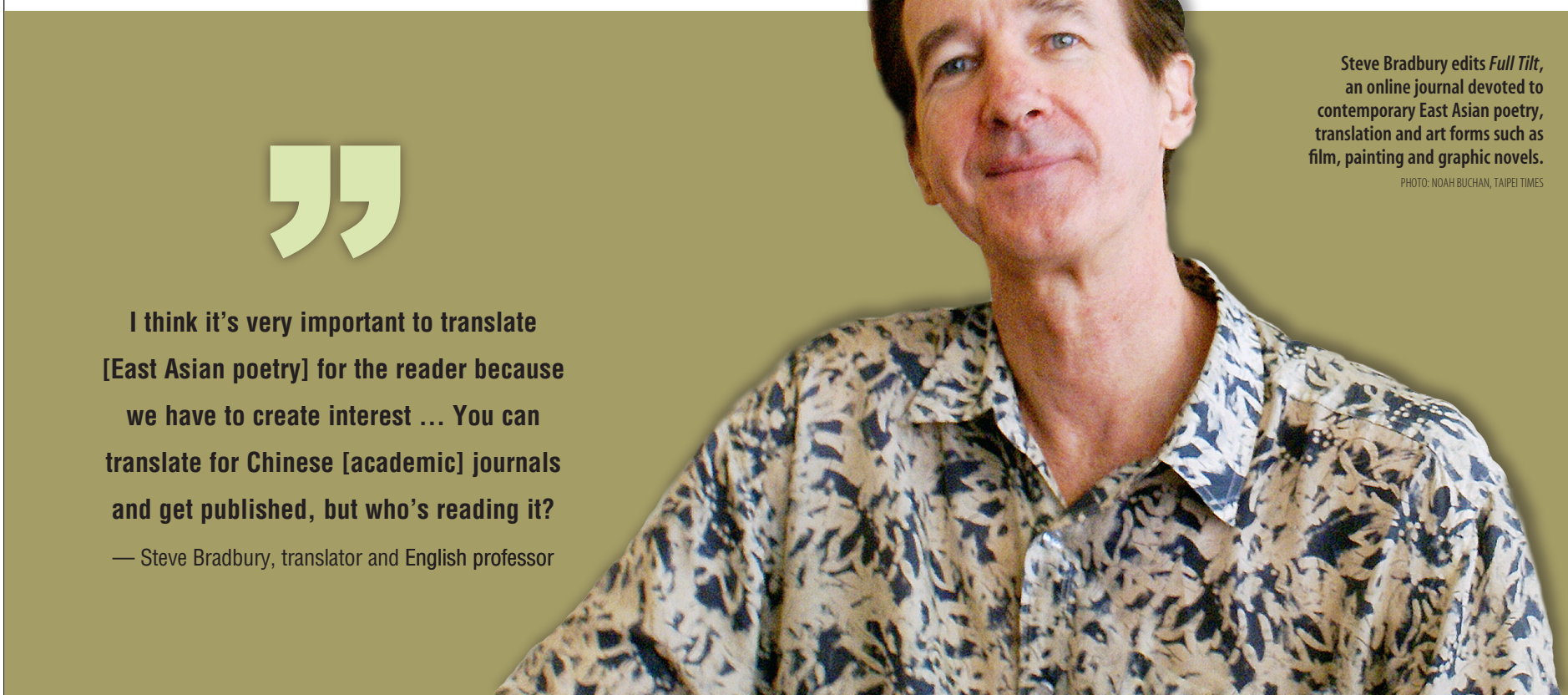
The plot of *Hippos* stems from a much discussed real-life killing involving two men who were friends of both Burroughs and Kerouac. As James W. Grauerholz, Burroughs' literary executor, explains in an afterword: "The enmeshed relationship between Lucien Carr IV and David Eames Kammerer began in St. Louis, [Missouri] in 1936, when Lucien was 11 and Dave was 25. Eight years, five states, four prep schools, and two colleges later, that connection was grown too intense, those emotions too feverish." In the pre-dawn hours of Aug. 14, 1944, in Riverside Park in Manhattan, Carr stabbed Kammerer with his Boy Scout knife, then rolled his body into the Hudson River. Burroughs and Kerouac were among the first people Carr confessed to; he later turned himself in and was charged with second-degree murder. The Carr-Kammerer story fascinated the writers' circle, and several contemporaries, including Allen Ginsberg, would try their hand at telling the story.

## Publication Notes



In *Hippos*, Burroughs and Kerouac lay out a fictionalized account of the days and weeks leading up to the killing. Carr is called Phillip Tourian here, and Kammerer is Ramsay Allen. While Allen drones on and on to Dennison about Tourian, Tourian tells Ryko that he wants to escape from the suffocating Allen and suggests that he and Ryko ship out with the merchant marine. They make several efforts to get on a ship to France but are repeatedly thwarted for a variety of reasons, like not having the right stamp on their union cards or getting into an argument with another sailor.

Meanwhile, all the characters spend a lot of time hanging out in bars and restaurants and friends' apartments, complaining about their lack of money and putting on artistic airs, as if they were a bunch of French existentialists. Tourian does stupid party tricks like taking a bite out of a cocktail glass, chewing it up and washing it down with some water. Allen tries to spy on the object of his affection while he is sleeping. Ryko fights and makes up with his girlfriend, Janie, who wants to get married. And Dennison shoots himself up with morphine. None of these one-dimensional slackers are remotely interesting as individuals, but together they give the reader a sense of the seedy, artsy world Kerouac and Burroughs inhabited in New York during the war years. And so these, really, are the only reasons to read this undistinguished book: for the period picture it provides of the city — think of Billy Wilder's *Lost Weekend* crossed with Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* — and for the semi-autobiographical glimpses it offers of the two writers before they found their voices and became bohemian brand names.



Steve Bradbury edits *Full Tilt*, an online journal devoted to contemporary East Asian poetry, translation and art forms such as film, painting and graphic novels.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

I think it's very important to translate [East Asian poetry] for the reader because we have to create interest ... You can translate for Chinese [academic] journals and get published, but who's reading it?

— Steve Bradbury, translator and English professor

# Getting the word out

Steve Bradbury thinks contemporary East Asian poetry is underrepresented in the field of literary translation. His online journal 'Full Tilt' seeks to change that

BY **NOAH BUCHAN**  
STAFF REPORTER

poets such as Taiwan's Hsia Yu (夏宇), China's Yu Jian (于坚) and South Korea's Kim Hyesoon — the latter two of which will read at this year's Taipei Poetry festival (go to [www.taipeipoetry.org](http://www.taipeipoetry.org) for details in English and Chinese).

## CREATING INTEREST

A poetic translator in his own right, Bradbury can often be found in a coffee shop close to Da-an Forest Park (大安森林公園) pouring over a volume of poetry or translating a poem. In addition to publishing numerous translations in literary journals, Bradbury has published three volumes of poetry in translation, the most recent of which is *Feelings Above Sea Level: Prose Poems From the Chinese of Shang Qin*, which is available at Tang Shan bookstore (唐山書店).

He first came to Taiwan in 1983 to improve his conversational Mandarin after receiving a bachelor's degree in Chinese from San Francisco State University, where he studied under Goldblatt, the preeminent translator of contemporary Chinese fiction, who inspired him to become a translator and encouraged him to go to Taiwan.

After a year-and-a-half in Taipei, Bradbury moved to Japan to improve his Japanese. He worked as a translator and editor until he returned to the US in 1987 for graduate studies, obtaining a master's in Chinese and a doctorate in English from the University of Hawaii.

"When you translate a poem from a contemporary writer and publish it in a journal you are in competition with every other poet in the world and there are

fabulous translators and fabulous poets in Europe in the Middle East and Latin America. I think it's very important to translate for the reader because we have to create interest," he said, explaining his approach to translating from Chinese to English.

Bradbury feels that East Asian poetry doesn't have much of a following because scholars are often too concerned with explaining the poem rather than generating a readership for it. "You can translate for Chinese [academic] journals and get published, but who's reading it?" he said. Moreover, with few exceptions, Western scholars of East Asian poetry are mainly interested in teaching and translating classical poetry. "Translators of contemporary European poetry [for example] ... balance readability with scholarly accuracy and they generate a real readership, not just students," he noted.

He added that there is little institutional support in Taiwan for poetry — in contrast to the US where contemporary poetry appears on the syllabi of most literature courses and there are hundreds of creative writing programs. In the latter, students attend workshops where they are expected to read "tonnes and tonnes" of poetry and literary theory and critique each other's writing. As a result, there has been a kind of "poetry renaissance" in the US over the past decade.

"Perhaps only one of every 25 creative-writing graduates in the US [will find work in a university]. But this person will be able to make a living out of it ... The universities are not only supporting the writing of poetry but they also have poetry journals and poetry publishers," he said. "But not here."

## THE GOOD OLD DAYS

The lack of institutional support for poetry in Taiwan, Bradbury said, is largely a recent phenomenon.

"Before the liberalization of the media, every newspaper in the country was 12 pages long and one whole page was devoted to literature, a portion of which was poetry. Some of the poets of that era such as Yu Guangzhong (余光中) are still household names. And they would be invited to give talks in universities." For "[t]he younger generation, if you are writing a poem, you don't have any support, beside the literary competitions that *United Daily News* (聯合報) and a few other newspapers hold once or twice a year," he said.

"To be sure, there are still plenty of Chinese-language journals burning a candle for local poetry, but most are dedicated, by and large, to advancing the careers of frumpy septuagenarians, who may have been stellar poets in their day but are hardly up to the task of galvanizing younger generations of readers accustomed to a steady diet of the *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報), cable television and the World Wide Web," he said later in an e-mail exchange.

Of course, Bradbury isn't suggesting a return to Martial Law. But he believes Taiwan's academic system has failed to nurture creative writing.

Bradbury said that without events like the current poetry festival, "poetry wouldn't even make the obituary column." A little too pessimistic, it seems. The festival enjoys a high profile, particularly since the addition of cinema to the program, a phenomena increasingly common in East Asia.

"Films have been a part of the festival since Hung Hung (鴻鴻) started curating it three years ago, in part as a marketing strategy to draw in younger people, but also because many of the best poets writing in Chinese today, Hung Hung among them, are in fact filmmakers," Bradbury said.

"I'll probably get shot for saying this, but if it weren't for Hsia Yu, Hung Hung and a handful of other poets associated with the Poetry Now (現在詩) coalition, we could all pack up and go home," he said.

Perhaps, but Bradbury is doing his part to keep Taiwan's bards in the public eye.

[ **HARDCOVER:** US ]

# The 'Great Inflation': America's overlooked economic crisis

Robert J. Samuelson argues that policies aimed at fostering 'full employment' created inflationary pressures that continue to erode US standards of living

BY **BARRY GEWEN**

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Robert J. Samuelson, an economics columnist for *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, says historians have not understood the significance of the "Great Inflation" that raged through the economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was, he argues in *The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath*, one of those watershed moments in American history, not at the level of the Civil War or the Great Depression, to be sure, but perhaps the major turning point of the postwar era.

In 1976, the Consumer Price Index rose by 4.9 percent; over the next few years it climbed steadily until it reached double digits, 13.3 percent in 1979 and 12.5 percent in 1980. And with these rising prices, productivity declined, standards of living fell, investors fled the stock market, debt crises followed one upon another. Almost everyone was affected, and not just in their wallets and bank accounts.

As he writes, "The economy" is also a social, political and psychological process," and the Great Inflation, he explains, did real damage to the American psyche, engendering a feeling of

hopelessness, causing citizens to lose confidence in their political and economic institutions. An inflationary psychology took hold, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy as wages chased prices in an ever more destructive cycle. "In all of American history," Samuelson writes, "this inflation had no comparable precedent."

And who was to blame for this unparalleled disruption, this system-threatening state of affairs? According to Samuelson, we all were. Pogo Possum said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Samuelson says so too.

His tale of culpability begins at the end of World War II. With the Depression a recent memory, Americans entered peacetime worried above all about the return of widespread joblessness. In 1947, US President Harry S. Truman declared, "The job today is to see to it that America is not ravaged by recurring depressions and long periods of unemployment." Dwight D. Eisenhower agreed. But it was under John F. Kennedy that the nation ambitiously shifted from fighting unemployment to promoting "full employment."

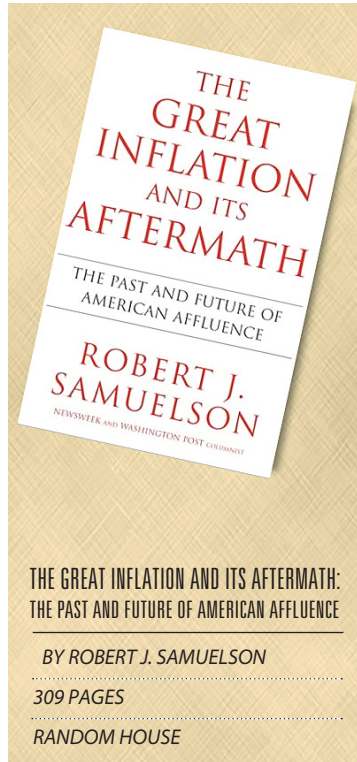
Armed with the tools of Keynes-

ianism, Kennedy's team of economic advisers believed they could fine-tune the economy, controlling business cycles and eliminating the possibility of recession. Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter all went along with the new thinking, as did the economists at the Federal Reserve, whose easy-money policies abetted the politicians' full-employment aspirations. A bipartisan consensus had been achieved. But, Samuelson says, the consensus was wrong. "Wishful thinking" had triumphed over reality.

Reality came in the form of inflationary pressures. Beginning in the mid-1960s policies intended to promote full employment — tax cuts, budget deficits, low interest rates, easy credit — were pushing prices up. US Presidents, both Democratic and Republican, chose to ignore the warning signs, or to administer weak palliatives until it was too late. Once the inflationary mentality set in, only the harshest medicine would work. Inflation had to be wrung out of the economy. The costs would be high.

At this point, Samuelson's story enters its heroic phase: Ronald Reagan and Paul Volcker stepped

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onto the stage and seized control of history. As chairman of the Federal Reserve, Volcker proceeded to fight inflation with stern determination,

tightening money and credit and dragging the economy into what Samuelson calls "the most punishing slump since the 1930s." Unemployment climbed to 10.8 percent (still a postwar high), and everyone screamed. US Senator Howard Baker, the Republican majority leader, called for the Fed to "get its boot off the neck of the economy"; others demanded Volcker's head, or at least his resignation. But his medicine broke the inflationary fever by the mid-1980s, and prices stabilized.

Reagan's role in all this was to provide Volcker with crucial political cover. Unlike the presidents before him, Reagan insisted that inflation be brought under control, even if the cost was high unemployment. Unsurprisingly, his own popularity plummeted. In early 1982, *Newsweek* ran a cover story headlined *Reagan's America: And the Poor Get Poorer*. But in an act of genuine political courage Reagan persevered, and Samuelson concludes, "Of all Reagan's economic achievements," his successful battle against inflation "was the most definitive. The rest of his economic record was mixed."

After this stirring description of

the high drama of the early 1980s, the remainder of *The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath* is anticlimax. In fact, the narrative dissolves. In bringing his story down to the present, Samuelson identifies current economic problems and proposes solutions. Some of his arguments are irrefutable, if familiar: The country is going to have to find a way of reforming Social Security and Medicare.

But for the most part he gets lost, and loses his readers, in a morass of on the one hand, on the other. We should trim back the welfare state — but we should also worry about fairness. We should deal with the problems of globalization — but consensus will be difficult to achieve. The final third of Samuelson's book has none of the sweep and clarity of the earlier sections.

Worse, perhaps because Samuelson finished his book before the current financial crisis fully hit, he spends too much time fighting the last war (or even the one before that). His first policy recommendation, his "unambiguous message," is that we must maintain control over inflation. But at a time when unemployment in

the US is predicted to reach 8 percent or higher, and when the economy is feeling deflationary, not inflationary, pressures, a sermon about the evil of rising prices is not the one president-elect Barack Obama most needs to hear.

What's more, Samuelson says the larger lesson of his history of the Great Inflation is to demonstrate the dangers of good intentions. "Skepticism," he writes, "ought to qualify and restrain our reformist impulses." And as a warning against economic activism he adds, "Just because something isn't perfect doesn't mean it can be improved."

Fair enough. We should always question our intentions, heed the naysayers. And since politicians and policymakers almost inevitably overstep, the skeptic is usually proved correct — eventually. But skepticism can only raise questions; it can't provide answers or solve problems.

It's fine to maintain a healthy distance from our politicians and their hired guns, the economists, as Samuelson urges. Yet in this moment of crisis we would undoubtedly be wiser to be skeptical about Samuelson's skepticism.